



**USAID**  
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

**COLOMBIA**

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## CASE STUDY

# Democracy from the Ground Up

**USAID supports the world's first formal education program for local government council representatives in Colombia**



Photo Credit: ADAM

*"When I entered the diploma program I was completely ignorant. This has been the greatest opportunity I've had to learn what I need to do to respond to the community that has placed its trust in me."*

**Simón Córdoba**  
Council member, San Lorenzo, Cauca.

**CHALLENGE:** In theory decentralization offers the potential for increased government responsiveness to local needs and opportunities for ordinary people to participate in government. In isolated municipalities, which provide an ideal space for illicit activities to flourish, there is an even greater need in increasing the presence of the government. In practice there are tremendous challenges to strengthening local democratic institutions. In Colombia, municipal government is supported by a council of elected representatives, designed to provide a system of "checks and balances" on the use of political power. This is a potentially powerful democratic instrument, particularly since there are approximately 12,250 council members distributed across the entire country. Unfortunately, it is significantly undermined by the fact that most council members are poorly educated, with only 30% having a high-school degree.

**INITIATIVE:** Seeing this as a tremendous window of opportunity, USAID worked with a number of Colombian governmental and educational institutions to launch a professional diploma in Municipal Public Administration for the country's council members. The program takes 12 months to complete and includes 10 modules designed to create practical skill-sets in areas such as: public finance, budgeting, and the provision of public services. The inaugural course began in August 2006 and produced nearly 1,000 graduates a year later - just in time for the country's municipal elections.

**RESULTS:** In just over a year, the program has surpassed initial targets and yielded an impressive set of results:

- **10 formal training modules implemented in 16 departments and 53 sub-regions.** Clear evidence of the broad geographic impact of the program.

- **1,000 council members from 500 municipalities graduated** A concrete indication that the program has genuinely reached the grass-roots level.

The program has a built-in multiplier effect as all participants are required to pass on their new knowledge to at least 15 other potential council members and present a report of this work. As one happy graduate reported, the diploma has already proven itself as an important campaign tool in recent elections.

